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AUTHOR Nayar, P. B.
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ABSTRACT

A functional-notational syllabus was developed for use in Papua New Guinea because the English language needs and terminal competence of students in that country are more easily identifiable in terms of functional-notional categories than of language structures. The syllabus for grades 7-10 is divided into units or topics of language uses, and each language use is described in terms of its communicative purpose and concepts involved. Whenever possible, language uses are linked to the subject areas where they are used or needed frequently. The most typical forms in which the uses are realized are listed or shown in a model. The topic is broken into specific classroom objectives that are graded from passive identification through discrimination to active production, incorporating the necessary reading and writing skills. There is no teaching of language structure as such, and structures are taught only as the means of realization of language uses. The syllabus is based on a tentative analysis of the communicative and intellectual needs of an idealized Papua New Guinean school leaver. Problems occurring with the new system include political, bureaucratic, and academic barriers, difficulty in finding appropriate teachers and in training teachers in the functional approach, lack of instructional materials, and mistrust among proponents of conventional teaching methods. (MSE)

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A FULLY FUNCTIONAL ESL SYLLABUS: A PIONEERING EFFORT IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA*

P.B. Nayar
University of South Carolina

The functional-notional approach to language teaching, in one form or the other, has been around for over a decade. Quite a lot has been written about it; it has been bandied about, misunderstood, misidentified, experimented upon, criticized as a bandwagon, and finally even put away under the umbrella of the magic phrase "communicative language teaching". It is not my purpose here to go into the theoretical issues defining notions or language functions except in terms of the specific interpretation of them within the framework of the Papua New Guinea Syllabus. By "notions" are meant abstract categories of the human conceptual system, possibly language independent, but yet somehow language oriented. "Functions" are communicative intents, instances of purposeful, goal-oriented language behavior. Language functions are realized through language forms with ordinarily no one-to-one correspondence between the form and the function. The same notion can manifest in a variety of functions, each of which again can be realized through a variety of forms. Conversely, a single utterance form can perform a variety of functions and contain a number of notions. For example, "I am going to be here for three weeks" is a positive declarative sentence in form, with a subject, verb and prepositional phrase. Its function, however, will be decided by a variety of linguistic and extralinguistic factors that control the pragmatics of the utterance. It could be a promise, an announcement, a threat, an excuse or even a refusal to do something, and perhaps many other things

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Bhaskaran Nayar has taught ESL/ESF for over twenty years in India, Ethiopia, England, Papua New Guinea and the USA.

*This paper comes out of my acquaintance with the high school system and the teacher training program at the Goroka Teachers College of the University of Papua New Guinea, where I worked as a teacher educator for three years. During those years I was also involved in the development of the secondary English syllabus as a member of the Papua New Guinea Provincial High School English Syllabus Advisory Committee. I have based my information on my first hand experiences and also extensively on the information from the archives of the English Curriculum Division of the Papua New Guinea Department of Education, unreservedly provided by the Senior Curriculum Officer, Mr. Alex Scott, whose sense of purpose and resilience have largely kept the curriculum going.

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depending on the communicative intent of the speaker. There are at least five notions involved in the sentence: identification, existence, deixis, quantity and time. In order not to be bogged down by the theoretical interpretations of notions or functions, a practical, composite unit "language use" has been made the prime unit of the Papua New Guinea Syllabus. In the words of the originator of the syllabus:

> The term *functional* as it is used here, does not only refer to what is sometimes known as the *communicative function* or *functional meaning* (i.e. the social purpose of the utterance). It refers also to the *conceptual function* or *conceptual meaning* (i.e. the conceptual focus of the utterance). Thus what we are here calling a *functional syllabus* is what Wilkins has called a *notional syllabus* (Barnett n.d.:3).

(The term *language use* is envisaged as slightly broader than normal communicative functions in that it also incorporates notional meaning.)

A few words of background information may be relevent here. Papua New Guinea is a young nation in the South Pacific with a population of about three million, known to the West mostly for its interesting anthropological features. The apparent smallness of the population is highly misleading. The country is extremely complex demographically and incredibly diverse linguistically. There are a little more than seven hundred living languages, mostly of the Austronesian and Melanesian families. Literacy is not very high, thanks to the efforts of the erstwhile colonial masters.

The educational system starts with six years of primary school. About a third of the primary school graduates, selected on a regional basis for political reasons of national parity, are allowed to go on to a four-year secondary or high school program of grades 7 through 10 in what are called Provincial High Schools. It is with the English syllabus of these very schools that we are concerned here. Some twenty years ago secondary schools were very few and graduates numbered under a hundred. Today there are over one hundred high schools with an annual turnover of about 10,000 graduates. Most of the schools are residential. It is not uncommon to have a class of 30 to 40 students, where not more than two or three will have the same first language. Most students will be bi- or trilingual. The medium of instruction from the first year of the primary school is English. The general lingua franca of the country is TOK PISIN (that is, New Guinea Pidgin) or English or Hiri Motu, depending on the region, situation, role relationship, medium, domain, level of formality, etc.

Such diverse ethnic, tribal and consequent linguistic factors create a strange situation where English has a unique and unparallelled role. Unlike India, there is a total dependence on English at all levels of education and public life. Unlike Nigeria, English is not the only link language. Unlike Ethiopia, English is not merely the language of secondary or higher education, but also of government administration. The English syllabus, therefore, has to be very sensitive to the complex role English has in the public life of Papua New Guinea. English learning has to be freed from cultural dependence and have a more pragmatic goal.

Several factors culminated in the development of the functional-notional approach. Earlier versions of the syllabus were largely traditional drawing upon the pattern used in the State of Queensland in Australia. This was subsequently

replaced by a specially-designed "territory" syllabus, which, while still emphasizing adherence to standard English structure, urged "greater latitude of expression in order to facilitate the eventual creation of a local variant of English that is internationally comprehensible but embodies the cultural and national characteristics of its users" (Department of Education Documents 1981:3). Independence brought about a change in attitude towards both the place and role of English, and the newly independent country felt the need to revitalize its outdated colonial syllabus. The English language was no longer the key to "being civilized" but, as in most developing countries, to economic development through knowledge accessible most easily through English. Effective communication in English became more important than just learning English as a school subject. Communicative competence for a Papua New Guinean needed a more precise definition in view of the changed political, social and academic developments. Earlier syllabi presumed teaching by native speaker teachers and, therefore, left a lot to the intuition and initiative of the native speaker. By 1980, however, more that three quarters of the high school English teachers were nationals, recently graduated and comparatively inexperienced.

Quite a few were actually trained to teach other subjects but ended up teaching English, just as English teachers ended up teaching other subjects. These teachers were fluent but their English was not totally error free and, therefore, they were "in fact much more credible as models of communicative competence than as models of linguistic competence" (Barnett n.d.: 2). Most of them would face difficulties in handling a syllabus that presumed excellent linguistic competence. The syllabus, therefore, needed considerable reorientation in approach, content and scope. Among other things, it had to be more comprehensive to include not merely items to be taught, but also details of language components involved, presentation techniques, models and guidelines of methods and activities, integrating the various skills components as well. In 1975, the Department of Education commissioned one Mrs. Jenny Barnett to restructure the secondary syllabus and the functional syllabus is the result of Mrs. Barnett's efforts.

What then is the rationale for a functional-notional approach? In a situation like in Papua New Guinea, the learner needs English not so much as a code for *saying* things, but more as a means of *doing* things. On the one hand, a Papua New Guinean needs to develop the necessary English language uses that would enable him to act and react in events and situations inaccessible and impossible through his LI. On the other hand, apart from being a means of social and professional interaction, English is also the language of all formal education and hence the only language of the intellectual make up of a Papua New Guinean. Although technically a second language, Papua New Guinean students need English for most of their intellectual and mental activities almost like native speaking students. The English language they learn should produce at least restricted communicative competence and unrestricted intellectual activity. In such a situation, the language needs and terminal competence are, therefore, more clearly identifiable in terms of functional-notional categories than in terms of sets of language structures. The nature, range and sophistication of the set of linguistic tools they would need would depend upon what they want to do with the tools. Thus, academically and pedagogically, it is more efficient and economical to set functional objectives for the learners, language competence and to describe the skills of effective language behavior based on functional units of speech. The teaching is then oriented towards

effective spoken and written communication through the realization of these language uses. This way, for the students, language learning becomes purposeful behavior in real or potentially real situations, a meaningful mental activity and social behavior that they find relevent and motivating.

The basic unit of the syllabus, as stated earlier, is language use. Although the language use is defined basically as a category of communicative purpose, it is supposed to include notional categories of conceptual and referential meanings. In the syllabus these notional meanings are called *concepts*. The term language use fuses together the notion-function dichotomy and provides an integrated module of study. The central taxonomy divides language uses into three general categories – enquiring, informing and control, reminiscent of Austin's (1962) locution, illocution and perlocution.

The layout of the syllabus follows a pattern. The entire syllabus of grades 7 through 10 is divided into units or topics of language uses. Each language use is then described in terms of its communicative purpose and concepts involved. Whenever possible, language uses are linked with the subject areas where they are used or needed frequently. The most typical forms in which the use is realized are then either listed or shown in a model. The topic is then broken down into specific classroom objectives. These objectives are carefully graded from passive identification through discrimination to active production, incorporating also the necessary reading and writing skills. The formal language features of a function, what VanEk (1975) calls "exponents", are called *signals* in this syllabus.

There is no teaching of language structures per se, and structures are, when necessary, taught only as the signals or means of realization of language uses. The eventual plan is to organize the entire syllabus in a very comprehensive way for each of the four years, grades 7 through 10. Each grade will have a book listing the items of language uses, concepts, signals and objectives; a students' book that contain graded learning materials for each topic; and a teacher's guide with elaborate, detailed, step by step guidance for the teacher, corresponding to each piece of material and activity in the students' book. The teachers' book will also contain details of the distribution of available contact hours over the various activities. This is very necessary, at least initially, until the teachers get used to the new approach and are able to take off on their own.

The syllabus is based on a tentative needs analysis of the various communicative and intellectual needs of somewhat idealized Papua New Guinean school leaver. A study was made of the classroom situations, all subject syllabuses and teachers guides, school social interaction and school learners' activities. Most channels and areas of communicative and academic needs were taken into account and concerned people were consulted. A number of objective criteria were used for selection of language uses. These were:

1) the frequency of the need,
2) the immediacy of the need,
3) the role played by one language use within another – e.g. identifying differences within describing change, and
4) relevence to concepts being introduced or emphasized across the curriculum, e.g. evidence, comparison, cause and effect, etc.

Various criteria were used for grading:

1) The complexity of thought involved in a language use—e.g. describing the outward appearance of a concrete object is less complex than describing abstract qualities like desirability.
2) the grammatical complexity of signals involved,
3) need for variety in types of language use—i.e. interspersing informing, enquiring and control uses,
4) a spiralling development of expression over four years for the most complex and frequently called for language uses, and
5) relevence to the time for the year—e.g. settling in or preparing to leave (personal communication from Jenny Barnett, Department of Education Archives, Papua New Guinea).

What began in 1976 is still far from complete. Several political, bureaucratic and academic factors have bedeviled its promotion, completion and implementation. Mrs. Barnett, an Australian who devised and initiated the syllabus, could not carry through the project for various administrative and personal reasons and soon went back to Australia. Technically, the promotion and implementation for the syllabus is in the hands of the senior curriculum officer for English, who is responsible to the secretary of education through the chief curriculum officer. The English curriculum officer is also technically to be assisted and counseled by the curriculum advisory committee, comprised of representatives from the university faculty of education and teachers college, selected secondary school headmasters and senior subject masters. In actual practice, the curriculum officer finds himself in the role of a frustrated and overworked pooh bah, trying to do the work of administrator, coordinator, trouble shooter, examination setter, course writer and materials producer. The syllabus advisory committee has little or no representation from interested and knowledgeable Papua New Guineans, teachers, or academics. A ridiculously anomalous situation exists where a syllabus expressly meant for the specific situation of Papua New Guinea is discussed without any participation from the concerned nationals! The large turnover of expatriate experts involved does not help continuity or stability of perspective either. The needs of the nationals are deemed to be those assumed by expatriates!

The implications and repercussions of the syllabus have been interesting. The university's teacher training college graduates enough teachers every year, in spite of the attrition rate, to meet most of the country's teacher needs. But owing to inefficient bureaucratic processes of teacher allocation, schools do not get the teachers for the subjects they ask for and teachers do not end up teaching the subjects in which they were trained. In most schools the headmaster and senior subject master for English are native English speakers. In the case of English, quite often the expatriate's main qualification and asset may be that he or she is a native speaker who has some teaching experience not necessarily related to a similar situation and who is seldom experienced in handling a functional syllabus. On the other hand, trained Papua New Guinean teachers are a little more confident in handling the syllabus but lack the linguistic competence of their native speaking colleagues. Ideally this should result in positive symbiosis, but in practice, rarely. Because of the novelty of this pioneering approach, there is a lot of distrust generated, some of which may be well-founded. The experienced

teachers who are used to the trusted and tried traditional approaches are reluctant to give it up in favor of something untried. There is also a general hostility to the principles of the functional approach, which many people view as impractical and unworkable. Those teachers that are uninitiated into the functional approach feel intimidated by the animal they cannot cope with nor understand. Even those who are not intimidated by it are suspicious of it, and complain that language teaching has been replaced by "languaging", that is, mere preoccupation with language activities devoid of any theoretical foundations.

Most teachers are not put out so much by the new syllabus as by its state. Seven years after its introduction it is still incomplete and tentative. The teachers have very little to go by except the bare topics listed. Because of the unique nature of the syllabus, commercial support material like textbooks or workbooks are not available and inexperienced teachers with inadequate language competence are livid with frustration. For some time to come, at least, teachers would need to be virtually led by the hand through the syllabus. Administrative support and financing for the necessary supporting staff of course writers were painfully lacking. This means that the survival of the syllabus may depend upon a very speedy completion of the students books and teachers guides. By 1983, only grade 7 requirements had been fully met. This totally non-academic matter may, ironically, turn out to be the cause of the eventual failure of the syllabus before it may even have a chance.

There have been some implications on teacher training too. Since most of the trainees that are trained in the Teachers College are ex grade 10, and are not linguistically sophisticated enough to completely understand the theoretical principles of the functional approach in a three-year training period, lecturers often have to adopt a piecemeal approach. The piecemeal approach results in the trainees' viewing the syllabus as disconnected pieces of functional isolates and not as an integrated whole. This, of course, is not a fault of the syllabus but of the training program and already plans to increase the training period are under way. But as long as the syllabus itself is patchy – which it is now – the trainees will not be able to develop any perspective. The uncertain syllabus situation results in different schools adapting the syllabus in different ways or sometimes not adopting it at all, and this makes practice teaching very difficult for the trainees. However even this situation is improving as the present generation of teacher trainees are those who have themselves been taught English with the functional syllabus, and, therefore, can relate to it much better. One interesting implication on teacher training is the trainee's linguistic competence. A functional syllabus produces a good communicator but certainly a poor language teacher. The new functionally taught teacher trainees have very little notion of grammatical categories, terminology, elements of sentence structure, processes in grammar etc. I found it very difficult to train them how to classify, name, evaluate and remedy the errors of their students, more so when the errors were syntactic or grammatical. Therefore a sizeable grammar component had to be built into the teacher training program. Another real problem was the intrinsic pedagogic difficulty involved in meaningfully handling a functional syllabus. Even an experienced native speaker teacher often found his/her linguistic and pedagogic resources stretched to come up with suitable teaching materials and strategies. A non-native speaker with limited linguistic competence would find it even more difficult. Hence, the teacher training program has to put in a lot of effort and time to extend the trainee's lan-

guage competence and create in him/her adequate self-confidence for intuitive judgments.

It would be very rewarding to see the outcome of this unique experiment. As the first one of its type in the whole world of ESL, the outcome of this could have a great bearing on the application of the functional-notional approach to the teaching of language. While the failure of the experiment need not necessarily invalidate the approach, the success of the experiment will certainly provide a validation for an exclusively functional-notional approach to ESL teaching.

Epilogue

The epilogue is rather depressing. This pioneering effort had been assailed by conservative headmasters, unsympathetic school inspectors, insecure teachers and many others in one form or the other since inception. Most of the criticism has been nothing more than elegies to the death of the structure and were voiced by the structure addicts, who could not envisage language teaching without pattern drilling and who wanted to believe that if they closed their eyes and cried wolf long enough, the functional monster that threatened them would go away and the good old days of happy and lazy structure drills, textbooks, comprehensions, dictations and grammar would come back. Then, instead of all these difficult classroom exercises like group activities, role play and simulation, the teacher can hide behind the cosy comfort of text-based teaching. But somehow the syllabus had held its ground. The latest information from the crestfallen curriculum officer is that the syllabus has been shelved in favor of a commercial textbook series! The author has agreed to adaptation of the book and while this is happening, for the next five years or so the schools will dovetail old and new materials.

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APPENDIX

Sample Units From The Syllabus

grade 7:
Naming
Instructions
Describing where it is
Making requests
Guessing

grade 8
Identifying changes
Making changes
Describing processes
Drawing conclusions
Obligations.

grade 9	*grade 10*
Fact finding	Drawing conclusions
Making decisions	Thinking and planning
Explanations	Out of school English

MAKING REQUESTS

Requests involve asking politely for something. We often make requests for goods for permission, and for service.

Model

May I have a new exercise book, please?
No, I'm afraid we've run out. Could you please try later?

Signals: Modals, verb inversion, please.

OBJECTIVES

a. Students should UNDERSTAND and AGREE to requests for goods
b. Students should MAKE requests for permission and REFUSE them politely with reasons for refusal.
c. Students should MAKE requests for service and ANSWER them.